E-Tutors' Pedagogical Practices in a Selected Open and Distance Learning University in South Africa

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Abstract

With the rapid growth of technology and educational innovations, e-tutoring is gaining widespread recognition among researchers and educators in an open distance learning (ODL) environment. Given the expanding interest and demand for e-tutoring, coupled with the growing concern that there are no significant differences in learning outcomes between face-to-face instruction and online teaching, it has become imperative to investigate the pedagogical practices of e-tutors. It is against this background that the study was conducted to investigate e-tutors' practices in the facilitation of learning in an ODL environment. This study followed a qualitative research approach using a case-study design, which included six e-tutors from a selected module in an undergraduate programme in the Department of Early Childhood Education. Data was collected through open-ended questionnaires and document analysis of discussion forum postings from the e-tutor sites. The study showed that the pedagogical strategies used by e-tutors are not fully aligned to the principles of ODL instruction and this compromised the quality of teaching and learning. Based on these findings, recommendations are made for the professional development of both academics and e-tutors.

Keywords: facilitation; e-tutors; pedagogical practices; open and distance learning; teaching presence

Introduction

There is increasing interest and investment in the development of student support strategies in higher education institutions, given the simultaneous pressures to widen student access and ensure success. The increase in student enrolment and the geographical distance between the student and the institution in an open and distance learning (ODL) environment make it difficult for academics alone to provide student support. Hence, many ODL

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institutions have adopted the e-tutoring system to support teaching, management and assessment of students through the use of online technologies (Caverly and MacDonald 2002). Johnson and Bratt (2009) posit that one of the affordances of e-tutoring is the individualised learning support provided to students through ongoing communication via technology between e-tutors and e-tutees.

Marra, Moore, and Klimczak (2004) argue that ODL offers a conducive environment for interactive learning through online discussion forums and student collaboration. Online discussion forums are most effective for problem-based learning, critical thinking and constructivist thinking, where knowledge is constructed from personal experience (Mazzolini and Maddison 2007). Scholars such as Oliver (1999), Bonk and Kim (2006), Johnson et al. (2000), and Phipps and Merisotis (1999) claim that while technology is significant in mediating learning in an ODL environment, what is more important is the quality of learning activities, the effectiveness of the instructors' pedagogical strategies and the ability of instructors to moderate students' responses. With this in mind, the study seeks to investigate the instructional practices of e-tutors in facilitating learning in an ODL environment.

Background to the Study

The study is conducted at the University of South Africa (Unisa), which is the largest (Open Distance eLearning—ODeL) university in the country and one of the 10 largest distance teaching universities in the world (Peters and Pickover 2001). At Unisa, the e-tutoring system was formalised through the implementation of an Integrated Tutor Model (ITM) in 2013. E-tutoring takes place through a virtual learning platform, myUnisa, and makes use of, inter alia, discussion forums and announcements for teaching and learning. The primary aim of e-tutoring is to improve the throughput rate, to improve students' academic performance and student graduateness, which are major challenges facing institutions of higher learning, as reported in the annual report of the Council on Higher Education (CHE 2007, 18). The dropout rate of students in distance institutions is approximately 10 to 20 per cent higher than in face-to-face institutions (Carr 2000; Moody 2004).

Objective of the Study

The primary objective of this study was to explore the pedagogical strategies implemented by e-tutors to improve student learning in an online environment

Research Problem

The quality of teaching in an ODL environment is of concern as the pedagogical strategies used by most ODL instructors are modelled after traditional forms of instruction instead of incorporating a design that is compatible with the requirements of ODL environments (Swann 2010). Several studies conducted by scholars such Baran, Correia, and Thompson (2011), Panda and Mishra (2007), and Lewis and Abdul-Hamid (2006) reported that technology alone has little impact on students' learning. What is more significant is the

instructors' pedagogical strategies used in combination with technology (Johnson et al. 2000; Nandi, Hamilton, and Harland 2012; Phipps and Merisotis 1999).

In this paper, I report research findings on e-tutors' pedagogical strategies in a selected module in the undergraduate B Ed programme in the Department of Early Childhood Education at the University of South Africa (UNISA). Table 1 below shows the students' percentage pass rates from 2013 to 2016 in two semesters per year. E-tutors were appointed in this module from 2014 onwards.

Table 1: Pass rate of students over four years

Year	2016		2015		2014		2013	
Semesters	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2
Pass rate	79	77	75	78	80	77	79	76

As seen in Table 1, there were no significant differences in the pass rates of students in this module even after the appointment of e-tutors in 2014.

While there may be other factors that contribute to students' pass rates, the limitation of this study is that it focuses purely on the e-tutors' pedagogical strategies. Hence the research question is: How do e-tutors' pedagogical strategies contribute to students' learning in an online environment?

It is anticipated that this study will contribute to the institution's knowledge on how to harness and improve the pedagogical practices of e-tutors in order to contribute to students' learning. The study offers recommendations for professional development of e-tutors, and institutional support to improve the instructional practices of e-tutors. The literature study shows a paucity of studies on e-tutors' pedagogical practices, as most studies focused on the experiences and perceptions of e-tutors (Blignaut and Trollip 2003; Chuang 2013; Fernandes et al. 2014; Pitsoane, and Mahlo, and Lethole 2015; Rivers, Richardson, and Price 2014). In addition, this study will contribute to the existing literature by looking at e-tutors' practices in authentic settings such as online discussions.

Literature Study

Several studies have reported on the affordances and opportunities offered within an online teaching environment. Partlow and Gibbs (2003) posit that the constructive underpinnings of online teaching provides opportunities for interactive, project-based and collaborative learning, offering students some choice or control over their learning. In a study on the effectiveness of online instructional strategies, Keeton (2004) found that the instructors gave higher ratings to online instructional strategies than face-to-face instructional strategies as these create an environment that supports and encourages inquiry-based learning. In an online environment, students are more independent as they have instant

access to vast resources of data and information—this is very different from the traditional classroom that is teacher-centred and where instructors control their environment. With learner-centred instruction, instructors take on the role of facilitators of information while guiding students toward solutions. In another study of pedagogical practices, Bonk and Kim (2006) found that only 23–45 per cent of online instructors actually used online activities related to critical and creative thinking, hands-on performances, interactive labs, data analysis, and scientific simulations, although 40 per cent of the participants said those activities were highly important in online learning environments. Hence, there was a significant gap between the instructors' preferred online instructional practices and those preferred by the participants.

Another significant affordance in an online environment is the use of technology. Naidu (2006) identified the flexible access to information and resources and the electronic access to a variety of multimedia material as two key attributes of online learning. "Flexible access affords freedom to students to access and use information and resources at a time, place and pace that is suitable and convenient to them, rather than the teacher and/or the educational organization" (Naidu 2006, 4). Distance education is rooted in the principles of flexible access. In keeping with the principles of flexible access, Crawford-Ferre and Wiest (2012) draw on the importance of well-designed learning experiences mediated by knowledgeable educators. Online educators should therefore design activities using multiple modes of learning in order to respond to the diverse learning styles and learning needs of students (Cercone 2008). In this regard, Herrington, Oliver, and Reeves (2003) suggest that multiple instructional strategies be embedded in course design and curriculum development.

Currently, access to information and communication technology offers a wide range of possibilities to deliver course content to students across a range of distributed settings. Technology affords students the opportunity to access up-to-date information as and when they need and to discuss the information with peers and their tutors at their convenience. Naidu (2006) argues that whatever mode of curriculum delivery is used, it is imperative that it takes into account the learning needs of students and staff, i.e. the time, place and pace that is most suitable to them.

Theoretical Framework

The literature study revealed that instructors' pedagogical strategies are shaped largely by the quality of learning experiences, the social interaction of individuals and the facilitation of learning. With this in mind, Anderson's (2003) theory of teaching presence, which constitutes designing and organisation, facilitating discourse and direct instruction, is relevant to this study. The theory of teaching presence posits these three components as critical in enhancing learning and optimal achievement of educationally defined outcomes. In this study, design and organisation refer to the planning by both academics and e-tutors with regard to designing learning experiences, teaching methods, assessment frameworks and establishing time parameters and netiquette. The facilitation of discourse refers to the

approaches used by e-tutors to engage students in meaningful reasoning. Anderson (2003) posits that the term "discourse" denotes the "power of reasoning," rather than the social connotation of conversation. In an online environment, effective discourse can result in students engaging in reasoning through a community of enquiry. It also provides a means by which students develop their own thought processes as they articulate their ideas to others. The importance of a safe environment based on trust has been singled out as significant in facilitating discourse among students. In addition, the e-tutors' facilitation of discourse is evaluated through identifying agreement and disagreement, reinforcing students' contributions and encouraging discussions. The strategies used by e-tutors in presenting content, activities or questions, summarising discussion, providing feedback and identifying misconceptions are categorised as direct instruction. The direct instructional component of teacher presence emphasises the importance of e-tutors' subject matter knowledge and pedagogical expertise in supporting students. The role of the e-tutor as the "guide on the side" must be viewed with caution as it has the tendency to diminish the fundamental component of teaching and learning (Anderson 2003).

The theory of teaching presence is premised on the notion that through the active intervention of a teacher, collaborative or cooperative learning becomes an effective instructional and learning resource.

Methodology

A qualitative research approach using a descriptive case-study design was used to investigate the pedagogical strategies of e-tutors in a selected module in the Department of Childhood Education. The module was selected based on an analysis of the students' pass rates over a period of eight semesters. The selected module was one of the modules that showed no significant differences in students' pass rates despite the appointment of e-tutors. The sample population comprised six e-tutors in the selected module with a minimum of three years' e-tutoring experience. A combination of data collection methods was used which included open-ended questionnaires, document analysis of study guides, institutional teaching and learning policies, and observation of discussion forum interactions. In total, 279 discussion forum postings from e-tutors and 617 discussion forum postings (responses) from students were included for analysis in this study.

Presentation and Discussion of Findings

Table 2 below is a summary of the number of postings from both e-tutors and students as per tutor sites over a semester period of 13 weeks. The significant variations in the number of e-tutors' and students' postings prompted me to further investigate whether the pedagogical strategies used by e-tutors had any bearing on the number of students' posting and the quality of the interaction.

Table 2: Number of e-tutor and student postings as per tutor sites

Tutor sites	**E-Tutors' postings**	**Students' postings**
A	80	78
B	27	33
C	35	167
D	59	54
E	30	73
F	53	204
Total postings	**279**	**617**

The postings enumerated in the table above were analysed using the constructs that underpin the theory of teacher presence, namely, design and organisation, facilitation of discourse and direct instruction.

The research findings are presented under the following six themes.

Theme 1: Pedagogical Strategies Tailored to Students' Needs Are Highly Endorsed in an ODL Environment

The study showed that e-tutors experience challenges in adapting their pedagogical practices to the needs and preferences of students in an ODL environment. In some instances, e-tutors posted a new activity or question on consecutive days and the answers to the questions the following day. This implies that e-tutors expected students to respond the very same day the questions were posted without allowing students the flexibility of time. This example clearly illustrates e-tutors' lack of consideration of the needs and preference of students studying at a distance. The students' failure to respond could be attributed to the e-tutors' lack of consideration for distance students' needs and preferences as stated by Naidu (2006). According to Naidu (2006), time is an important factor in distance education, as most students are employed full time and require time flexibility for the completion of tasks. It became evident in the study that most could not keep up with the rigid pace of e-tutors' teaching, hence they disengaged from the activities. Instead of responding to e-tutors' activities, students asked their own questions based on different learning units, indicating that students' learning pace differed. Students' questions were not related to the unit according to the tutor guidelines, but related to other units of the module. In one instance, a student was ahead in her studying and asked a question based on that unit, and the e-tutor replied "We're not there as yet. Let's all work on this study unit. I will help you when we get there." It seems that many e-tutors tend to misinterpret the use of the e-tutor guidelines provided by the academic staff. The purpose of the tutor guidelines is to guide both e-tutors and students on the amount or time to be allocated for each section or unit based on notional hours. Rather than using the tutor guidelines as a support resource to guide their instruction, e-tutors tend to use them rigidly without any adaptations.

Many e-tutors tend to use the "one-size fits all" instructional approach, which does not take into account the varying abilities, needs and interests of students.

Another reason for the students' disengagement may be attributed to e-tutor dependency as it became a tradition for the e-tutor to provide the answers to the questions asked the previous day. Towndrow (2004) pointed out that giving students the answers to questions is counterproductive to learning as it results in tutor dependency.

Apart from students' needs as distance learners, the study also showed that e-tutors showed little consideration for the individual needs of students, even though these needs are made explicit through discussion forums interactions. Continuous assessment of students' knowledge and skills is critical in an ODL environment to understand students' needs in order to adapt instruction accordingly (Keeton 2004).

However, where e-tutors adapted the guidelines and used innovative activities there was greater student participation. As seen in Table 1, tutor F and tutor C had fewer posts, yet there was a far greater number of students' postings. Unlike the other tutors who posted one activity for all students, tutor F and tutor C posted a range of activities and learning experiences that explored the unit content in different ways. These activities varied in cognitive difficulty and were designed to cater for the different abilities, contexts and needs of students. Students were afforded some flexibility as they were allowed a week to work through those activities, which afforded them flexibility. Some students answered all activities at once while some answered a few each day. The range of activities and a reasonable timeframe given to students encouraged students' participation. This finding resonates with the claims advanced by Swann (2010) that incorporating flexibility within learning environments and offering a range of activities allows discussions to evolve when deconstructing content and fosters a sense of community.

Theme 2: E-Tutors Have Some Awareness of the Role of Motivation in Learning

The study showed that e-tutors do make use of some strategies such as praise and encouragement to motivate students to participate. Generally, most e-tutors praised students with statements such as "Good try, thanks for trying, well done." One e-tutor in particular acknowledged the participation of every new student in the discussion forum by welcoming them as follows: "Welcome, Ms X to our group. We are happy to have you." The e-tutor stated that she found the "site info" on myUnisa very valuable as it enabled her to monitor the participation of her group of students. It was observed that when e-tutors read and respond to students' postings regularly, and provide feedback and comments frequently, then students' interest and motivation to learn increase. Conversely, when e-tutors are seldom present on the sites, the interaction of students dwindles. This finding resonates with the claims advanced by both Swann (2010) and Balaji and Chakrabarti (2010) that e-tutors have a responsibility to create meaningful dialogical conversations to engage students in learning. Similar studies conducted by Keeton (2004, 77) also showed that students need "support additional to that of the syllabus in understanding and persuing

the learning objectives of a course." Another potential problem has been the e-tutors' evaluation of the students' contributions towards the online discussions. Whenever e-tutors used negative comments to evaluate students' discussions, the students often withdrew from the forum. This observation is consistent with the findings reported by Pena-Shaff, Altman, and Stephenson (2005) that students rebel when discussions are graded, resulting in a negative impact on their participation. Marks, Sibley, and Arbaugh (2005) contend that e-tutors' effective communication is instrumental in creating a positive attitude towards online learning and motivating the students to learn.

Theme 3: Feedback Provided by E-Tutors Lacks Dialogical Interactions

Untimely feedback was the most common problem identified among e-tutors. Some e-tutors took as long as two weeks to provide feedback to students, which frustrated students as evident in the following remarks: "It's been over 2 months since all the assignments have been completed, and yet there's been no discussion." Another problem was that when students respond, there is no affirmation or confirmation of answers. In one instance, there were three different responses from three different students but there was no feedback from the e-tutor. One student asked, "Please can you tell us, which is the correct answer?" yet again there was no response from the e-tutor, leaving students confused and uncertain. In another instance, the feedback was irrelevant as revealed in the e-tutor's response: "You can find the answers on page 4." In another example, one student posted "Can you help me with the 5 styles of illustrations used for children's books. I am thinking wordless picture books etc., but there are only 4 listed in the study guide, and I do not think this is what is being asked for." Another student attempted to answer by naming five styles and then asked for clarity—"but is there anyone with the same answer? I'm really not sure." There was no further response from other students or the tutor. The student did not get the support she was looking for although another student tried to assist, leaving both students confused and uncertain. Black and William (2009) contend that students learn faster and more effectively when they are provided with feedback on their current performance and what might be needed in order to improve.

In another example, it was evident that feedback given to one student generated new understanding and thinking among other students, as explained in the following episode. The e-tutor posted the following activity: "Discuss the literary requirements for a good fantasy story for children. Then select a good fantasy story and provide reasons why you recommend the story for young children." One student responded: "The story I recommend is 'Charlie and the chocolate factory by Roald Dahl.'" The tutor's response was "That's a good choice … but remember students, you must still tell us why you recommend the book you selected for pre-school children." It is clear that the student only answered a part of the question as she did not explain the literary requirements and did not explain the reasons for selecting the story. Thereafter there were seven new student responses all giving different examples of stories with complete answers, such as the following:

> A good short fantasy story for pre-school is "The trouble with dragons" by Debi Gliori. The story makes sense and follows a logical sequence of events with a happy ending. There is no excessive violence. The underlying message is clear. The dragons are fantasy creatures but through personification, the children can relate to them as they act like we do. None of the animals wear clothes but they talk and think like we do. It has a lovely message that encourages children to respect all creatures and the planet.

The e-tutor responded "Well done. This is a good answer." The e-tutor's response to one student generated further discussions from other students. A number of influential studies have confirmed the decisive role of feedback in quality teaching and student learning (Black and William 2009; Ramsden 2003).

Theme 4: E-Tutors Have Limited Knowledge of ODL Pedagogical Strategies

The study showed that most e-tutors had little understanding of ODL pedagogical strategies as most used the traditional face-to-face teaching methods. This sentiment was explicitly stated by one participant, as can be seen in the following statement: "It's no different from classroom teaching. If you are a teacher, you can teach." Another e-tutor stated, "What I do know is that ODL is about open learning. What this means, I don't really know. However, I think its teaching with technology." Although e-tutors could not fully explain ODL pedagogical strategies, e-tutors showed some awareness of ODL strategies such as collaborative learning and problem-based learning in their instructional practices.

The e-tutors' awareness of collaborative learning environments is reflected in the following statement of one e-tutor: "I have created this forum so that we can share our experiences and assist each other where possible." Another participant asserted, "Remember that we are a team, any group member can reply." A significant episode that showed how the collaborative environment motivated other students to engage in learning was observed in one site when a student asked, "Is there someone who can assist me with this question?" Another student then responded by providing a brief explanation as well as the page number where the answer to the question could be found. The collaborative environment engaged other students to think. The benefits of the collaborative environment were that learning was reinforced through the interaction of the e-tutor as she evaluated the responses and added further remarks, for example: "Thank you Ms B (pseudonym) for assisting Ms A (pseudonym), that's good. Just to add, remember that you also need to use your own examples to explain your answer." The student's appreciation of the interaction with both peer and tutor was expressed as follows: "Thank you so much to both of you for your help. I found the answer and could have kicked myself; as I read these pages like a 100 times and could not find the answer." It was evident that the student–student, student–content and student–tutor interaction offered opportunities for meaningful learning.

A common practice that was observed among many e-tutors was posting extracts, readings and summaries taken directly from the study guide without any instruction or activity. For example, one participant stated: "Look at the different genres of children's literature." This

posting did not generate any response from students. Another common problem was the excessive use of closed-ended questions, which inhibited students' engagement. The closed-ended questions were recall type questions that had specific answers. In such cases, usually only one student responded as these questions do not allow for alternate answers other than the answers from the prescribed texts. This pedagogical strategy is in line with the instructivist approach to teaching of giving instructions and expecting answers. In contrast to closed-ended questions, problem-based learning activities result in critical thinking. The study showed limited use of problem-based learning. The study showed that e-tutors who used a problem-based approach asked fewer but more thought-provoking questions and allowed more thinking time for students. As is evident in Table 1, both tutor C and tutor F had far more student postings than tutor postings. The data analysis showed that e-tutors in sites C and F used mainly problem-based activities which generated increased student interaction. Tutor site C for example had 35 e-tutor postings and 167 student postings, and tutor site F had 53 e-tutor postings and 204 student postings. This finding resonates with Biggs's (1999) claims that active teaching methods, which involve learning through active experimentation and reflective thinking, encourage high levels of student participation in the learning process. Struyven et al. (2006) also noted that problem-based learning challenges students to construct knowledge leading to higher cognitive outcomes.

Theme 5: Instructional Practices Are Constrained by E-Tutors' Limited Content Knowledge

The limited subject matter knowledge of e-tutors contributes to their difficulties in planning, designing and developing learning experiences for students. Most of the e-tutors relied on the study guide for content knowledge. They struggled to answer questions asked by students that were not found in the study guide. Due to their limited content knowledge, they found it difficult to diagnose misconceptions in students' responses. In this regard, Ryan (2000) suggests that the main role of the online tutor is that of an educational facilitator: to contribute specialist knowledge and insight, focus the discussion on the critical points, to ask questions and respond to students' contributions, weave together disparate comments and synthesise the points made to foster emerging themes. Tutors did not receive discipline-specific training, which is necessary for tutoring specific modules in their disciplines. The limited subject matter knowledge of e-tutors constrained their innovative thinking and planning of learning activities as they became totally dependent on the use of the prescribed study guides. These e-tutors posted extracts and sections taken directly out of study guides, with the following instruction, for example, "Please read section 3.4 on page 23 of the study guide," leaving the students unsure of what needs to be done regarding the activity. Transferring existing study guide notes, tutorials, lecture notes, reading lists and making them available online will not enhance learning and is a meaningless exercise, as advanced by Koper and Olivier (2004).

Theme 6: Institutional Support Is Pivotal in Supporting E-Tutors' Facilitation of Learning

All six participants alluded that the online training they received from the Centre for Professional Development at Unisa was generic and focused predominantly on technological skills and knowledge. Similar to Keeton's (2004) argument that technology alone is inadequate in online learning, scholars such as Appana (2008), Lewis and Abdul-Hamid (2006) and Keengwe and Kidd (2010) claim that it is pedagogy not technology that is critical to the success of online learning. The findings showed that the academic support provided to e-tutors is inadequate; it focused only on content knowledge, as explained by one participant: "The tutor guidelines tell us what to teach and the time allocation for each unit. But the how to teach is not there." This finding resonates with the suggestions offered by scholars such as Koehler et al. (2004) that any professional development initiatives and instructional material for instructors must incorporate components of pedagogy, course management, technology and social dynamics. With this in mind, the analysis of the e-tutor guidelines document developed by the academics showed that it lacks comprehensive instructional support to e-tutors as it does not guide e-tutors on the pedagogy and instructional resources to be used in the mediation of learning.

Another significant finding was that e-tutors' pedagogical practices improved through collaborating with other tutors. One participant expressed this sentiment as follows: "I found that the lecturer's idea to get us to develop a series of activities and question banks per study unit and then to share these with each other made our job so much lighter. No doubt it was hard work at first to think of activities. But it became so much easier as we shared our resource activity packs with each other." The benefits of tutor–tutor collaboration is supported by scholars such as Anderson (2003), who argues that tutors need to interact continuously with each other as well as with academic staff to engage with content-based matter. Two participants indicated that when academics contribute to the discussion forums, the students' interaction increases. This is explicitly stated by one participant: "You find that when the lecturer joins in the discussion forum, it helps. Even if it is now and then, it helps because then the students also want to participate."

Recommendations

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

The Centre for Continuous Professional Development (CPD) must be mandated to design just-in-time short courses to empower academics and e-tutors. The implementation of the Integrated Tutor Model must be monitored and evaluated more vigorously so that gaps and weaknesses can be identified and reported upon. In this way appropriate intervention strategies can be designed and developed to close the knowledge gaps within the ITM. The Directorate for University Teaching and Learning Development (DUTLD) should be mandated to train and develop academics through formal programmes on how to integrate e-tutor support in courseware and module development.

Collaboration between tutors, tutors and academics, and tutors and students is an essential ingredient in online teaching. Hence, academics should be mandated with the task of establishing a functional tutor forum where challenges and best practices are shared. E-tutors learn collectively through the establishment of communities of practice (CoPs), which are groups of people who share a concern or passion and who interact regularly to learn more (Wenger 2012). Another way of promoting collaboration among tutors is through the use of reflective blogs that could be activated by academics on the "site-info" on the myUnisa platform to allow e-tutors to reflect on their practices. In addition, e-tutors can create CoPs among students and e-tutors. Students should know that they have something to gain—the forum is not wasting their time. It is not a "quick fix" to complete their assignments. The e-tutor site should become a stimulating learning environment that will assist e-tutors to master the subject matter required for teaching the module. To capacitate e-tutors in ODL pedagogical approaches and to strengthen e-tutors' subject matter knowledge, it is recommended that short learning courses that are subject specific should be developed. Furthermore, e-tutors have to be familiar with the contents of the material that their students receive and know how the module is structured. The design and development of course material must be reviewed by integrating components of ODL pedagogical instructional approaches. The curriculum design must take into account the integration of ICT and the management and support for students in an online environment. Academics need to review the e-tutor guidelines to include not only what must be taught but also to provide examples of activities to enhance active learning such as problem-based activities, scenarios, role playing, etc.

Recommendations for Further Research

Further research could be conducted on how education consultants at Unisa integrate e-tutoring within curriculum design and development in the study materials. The research should include all stakeholders who are members of the project team who design modules and programmes at Unisa. It is also recommended that empirical research be conducted on the extent to which Unisa students' graduation rates have improved since e-tutoring was implemented in 2013.

Conclusion

The objective of this study was to investigate the pedagogical strategies used by e-tutors to foster meaningful learning in an ODL environment. The themes emanating from the study show that e-tutors are not sufficiently equipped with the knowledge, skills and competencies that are required to provide online pedagogical instructional support to students in an online environment. Drawing from the theoretical framework of Anderson et al.'s (2001) theory of teacher presence, the study showed that planning, designing and organising the learning experiences are equally important to facilitation and direct teaching in an ODL context. All three categories of teacher presence are critical in an ODL context and require the e-tutor to be a subject matter expert. The analysis further indicates that the challenges of e-tutoring in an ODL environment include the lack of necessary support from

academics and the institution itself. The fact that all e-tutors have undergone some tutor training and have experience in teaching foundation phase, but lack knowledge of teaching in an online environment, confirms that teaching adults in an online environment is not an easy task and e-tutors require intense training to become competent and skilled.

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